SALTON SEA ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

March 23, 2004
9:30 – 3:30
Cal EPA Building, Sacramento

Meeting Summary

Department of Water Resources Director Lester Snow welcomed Advisory Committee members and led introductions of those present (list attached). The discussion of the first agenda item – role of Advisory Committee and Committee membership – was deferred until Secretary for Resources Mike Chrisman joined the meeting later in the morning. The meeting proceeded directly to the first presentation on the Lower Colorado River Multispecies Conservation Program (LCRMSCP).

Jerry Zimmerman of the Colorado River Board provided opening remarks on the program and its schedule, and was followed by Chris Harris of CRB with a program overview and status. LCRMSCP is currently wrapping up ten years of planning work and beginning the transition to implementation. The geographic scope of the LCRMSCP extends from Lake Mead to the Southerly International Boundary, comprising the Colorado River's historical flood plain in California, Arizona, and Nevada. Goals of the LCRMSCP include providing the basis for incidental take authorizations pursuant to the federal and California Endangered Species Acts (FESA/CESA) with regard to operation and maintenance of existing water management/delivery and power generation facilities, and for future water transfers and changes in points of diversion. The LCRMSCP is intended to provide a 50-year species conservation and habitat management blueprint for the planning area, and would provide a FESA/CESA compliance framework for certain Colorado River Quantification Settlement Agreement (QSA) activities. Proposed LCRMSCP actions include creating/restoring/maintaining wetland, riparian, and aquatic habitats – 8,238 acres of various habitat types – and operating stocking programs for native fish species. The estimated 50-year cost of the program, assuming that habitat restoration occurs on a 30-year build-out schedule, is $620 million (present value in 2003 dollars). LCRMSCP participants are currently discussing program cost-sharing (federal-non-federal, interstate, intrastate) and the need for implementing legislation. A draft biological assessment and environmental impact statement/environmental impact report will be released for public comment, with execution of a federal record of decision expected by the end of 2004.

Kim Nicol of DFG summarized DFG's latest quarterly Salton Sea fish monitoring report (Winter 2004). Committee members were provided with copies of the past year's quarterly monitoring data, which are based on gill net sampling at fixed locations. The Winter 2004 catch per unit effort values were low; only six tilapia were found at the sampling sites. There was discussion about the interpretation of these results, and past examples of seasonal and cyclical variability among the sea's fish populations. There

has been no long-term fish monitoring at the sea that would provide context for the current data. There do not appear to be significant changes in some of the major factors (salinity of the sea, availability of invertebrate food sources) that would affect fish populations. At DFG's request, USBR is proceeding with plans to carry out additional qualitative fish monitoring at other sites, and to investigate the status of invertebrate food sources (pileworms). There were questions regarding current salinity monitoring efforts – how much monitoring is currently being performed/consistency of the results.

Lester Snow opened the discussion of developing ecosystem restoration goals by noting that this is a complex subject and often entails an iterative process to define the ultimate objectives. He alluded to examples from the CALFED ecosystem restoration program, a major component of the CALFED record of decision. As was discussed at the Committee's January meeting, establishing Salton Sea ecosystem restoration goals is complicated by the lack of a clear point of historical reference – ecosystems in the Salton Trough were in constant change during prehistorical and historical times due to the fundamental nature of terminal lake systems. Kim Nicol described DFG's vision for Salton Sea ecosystem restoration, which is based on sustaining a widely diverse mosaic of numerous habitat types. Ensuing discussion about the ecosystem restoration goals transitioned, with Secretary Chrisman's arrival, into a discussion about the Advisory Committee's role. Points covered included:

⧫ Much of the discussion focused on the interrelationship of the ecosystem restoration study with other activities that have or may have overlapping or complementary areas. These activities include the Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP) for the QSA water transfers, State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) requirements pertaining to the QSA transfers, other California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) mitigation requirements for the QSA water transfers, Salton Sea Authority (SSA) activities, and LCRMSCP. There were a variety of questions about the schedule/status of these activities, the mandates behind their goals, and the processes being used, as well as comments that information developed for one activity should be shared among others. As the Committee requested, the State will put together a matrix or other tabulation summarizing these activities and their schedules/processes for the next Committee meeting.

⧫ It was pointed out that the ecosystem restoration project is actually an ecosystem rehabilitation project, since we would be establishing some desired baseline condition and then actively managing the system to maintain it in that condition.

⧫ The NCCP/QSA mitigation activities and Salton Sea ecosystem restoration are closely interconnected, as is the LCRMSCP. QSA water transfers' air quality mitigation activities need to be integrated with ecosystem restoration. The NCCP science advisory process needs to be hand-in-hand with ecosystem restoration. The focus needs to include the agricultural drains and upland habitat. It may be more beneficial to do projects at the river than at the sea.

♦ The State should use prior information developed by the SSA and the U.S. Geological Survey/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the Salton Sea Science Office. The work done at the New River wetlands demonstration project needs to be considered.

♦ We should consider doing something at the sea now, rather than waiting for the completion of the ecosystem restoration study. It was pointed out that SWRCB's requirements provide a 15-year period for protecting the sea from impacts of the QSA water transfers, and that Imperial Irrigation District is fallowing land to provide make-up water for the sea.

♦ There was discussion about the need for a good baseline on future inflows to sea, for CEQA no-action alternative analysis as well as for development of the action alternatives. Estimated future inflows to the sea can be affected by many factors in addition to the QSA water transfers and California's reduction in Colorado River water consumptive use to 4.4 million acre-feet, including Colorado River Basin hydrologic conditions, changes in cropping patterns in the Imperial and Mexicali Valleys, changes in water management activities in Mexico, and climate change. Several persons mentioned the impacts of the present Colorado River Basin drought on sea inflows. USBR is working with DWR to provide model runs and assumptions to be considered for baseline conditions.

♦ Several members pointed out that the sea will not remain the same size as it is today due to reduced inflows. We need to identify the mix of habitats that can realistically be sustained with reduced inflows.

♦ The need for good water quality and air quality monitoring programs was mentioned. These programs need to be integrated with the SWRCB monitoring requirements. Air quality issues are important for wildlife as well as for people.

♦ With respect to the Advisory Committee's role, Secretary Chrisman emphasized that it was intended to be a forum for policy-level discussions, providing input to the State on subjects such as development of alternatives and selection of a preferred alternative. Using ad hoc technical committees to review topics such as baseline modeling for the no-action alternative, air quality studies, and NCCP formulation was discussed -- although it was pointed out that there needs to be agreement on basic principles before technical committees can be effective. Director Snow seconded the need for technical committees/science advisory committees as the process moves forward.

♦ In response to a request from Imperial County that a geothermal industry representative be added to the Advisory Committee, Secretary Chrisman acknowledged the importance of the geothermal industry to Imperial County and pointed out that Committee membership was based on the criteria set forth in the implementing legislation. Electrical energy generation is not one of the membership categories contained in the legislation.

The Committee heard two presentations on the setting and biological resources of hypersaline lakes. Clay Perschon of the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources described the Great Salt Lake (GSL); Steve Parmenter of DFG described Mono Lake. Both waterbodies are much more saline than the Salton Sea, although localized freshwater inflows in the Great Salt Lake support limited fish populations in some areas. Both waterbodies provide major migratory bird habitat, supporting many of the same bird species observed at the Salton Sea. The GSL has the largest staging concentration in the world of Wilson's phalaropes, the second largest staging concentration in North America of eared grebes, the world's largest breeding populations of white-faced ibises and California gulls, the world's largest assemblage of snowy plover, and one of the three largest colonies of white pelicans in western North America. Mono Lake has the world's second largest breeding population of California gulls and supports nearly one-third of the North American population of eared grebes. The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network has designated the GSL as a Hemispheric Site and Mono Lake as an International Site. Both waterbodies are brine shrimp-dominated ecosystems. Utah manages commercial harvesting of brine shrimp at the GSL, an industry with revenues ranging from $70 million to $200 million annually. The GSL's elevation and shoreline fluctuate widely in response to annual runoff; regulatory requirements controlling Mono Lake's elevation were set in part to control emission of particulate matter from the exposed shoreline.

John Kramer of DWR gave an overview of the CEQA process and its requirements, and the requirements in the QSA implementing legislation regarding alternative development. The QSA implementing legislation calls for the Secretary for Resources to prepare a programmatic environmental document to accompany the ecosystem restoration study. DWR and DFG are joint lead agencies for the programmatic environmental impact report, and have released a notice of preparation to begin the administrative process required by CEQA. CEQA requires that the lead agency analyze a no action alternative and a reasonable range of feasible alternatives that could attain project objectives and avoid or lessen significant effects. Secretary Chrisman emphasized to the Committee that the State will fully comply with CEQA, and will not select a preferred alternative until after completion of an open public process. He realizes that some Committee members have already identified their own preferred plans for Salton Sea restoration.

Mike Woods of the Department of Conservation gave an overview of the Salton Trough's geothermal resources. The Salton Trough is a tectonically active region, as evidenced by its high seismicity and its geothermal features. Geothermal energy exploration and production have occurred and are occurring at the southern end of the Salton Sea. Cal Energy operates existing plants near the sea and is in the process of adding two additional units. There are additional potential reserves in this area, located immediately adjacent to and underneath the sea.

John Vrymoed of DWR gave a brief update on the geotechnical activities. The SSA/USBR report on the subsurface investigation was finalized last month and is available on the SSA's web site. The sea floor was found to have approximately 30 feet

of very soft clay sediments underlain by stiffer clays. DWR has been working with the SSA's consultants and with USBR staff in developing a conceptual design for in-sea barriers.

Next Meetings

April 27th – El Centro
June 8th – Sacramento

ATTENDANCE

Advisory Committee Members or Alternates Present

Larry Biland, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Fred Cagle, Sierra Club
Celeste Cantu, State Water Resources Control Board
Michael Cohen, Pacific Institute
Dan Cooper, California Audubon
Kim Delfino, Defenders of Wildlife
Karen Douglas, Planning and Conservation League
Bill DuBois, California Farm Bureau Federation
Bill Gaines, California Waterfowl Association
Elston Grubaugh, Imperial irrigation District
Bob Ham, Imperial Valley Association of Governments
Rick Hoffman, Riverside County
Gary Johnson, Colorado River RWQCB
Al Loya, Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians
Lisa Northrop, Bureau of Indian Affairs
Brad Poirez, Imperial County APCD
Larry Purcell, San Diego County Water Authority
Tom Raftican, United Anglers of Southern California
Steve Robbins, Coachella Valley Water District
Nicole Rothfleisch, Imperial County Farm Bureau
Bernard Shanks, U.S. Geological Service
Dennis Underwood, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California
Barry Wallerstein, South Coast AQMD
Mike Walker, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Dan Walsworth, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
John Wohlmuth, Coachella Valley Association of Governments
Gary Wyatt, Imperial County